

I know you have a lot of big decisions to make and I know you probably don't hear a lot of thank you's throughout the day, but I wanted to publicly thank the Legislature, the Governor and DCF for maintaining the Homeless Youth Funding.

My name is Efrain Torres III and I am receiving services through the homeless youth program, The Start Program run by **The Connection Inc.** If you asked me to paint a picture of my life it would look very similar to a rollercoaster – with many ups and downs. When I was young, my childhood quickly began to deteriorate as a result of my father's problem with substance abuse. During that time, school was difficult, bullying was an everyday nightmare, and my family problems didn't make the situation better, as I had no one I could lean on. Despite these obstacles, I was driven to pursue a better life for myself. When I was in 8th grade I began to develop a passion for the arts and quickly sought out mentors who encouraged me to enter competitions, work on commissioned projects, and donate my talent in creating artwork for neighborhood recovery projects.

In high school much didn't change, bullying was still a problem and my family issues were still a constant reminder of why I wanted to strive for better. In July of 2014 I had to make the difficult decision to leave home. What many people didn't know, was that I was a victim of physical and verbal abuse by a father with a drug addiction. My belongings were taken and pawned to support that addiction on an ongoing basis. Our refrigerator and food pantry were usually empty. I was told I needed to find religion to "fix" my interest in the arts and my sexual orientation.

I was homeless. I stayed with a relative, friends, and a mentor during my senior year of high school. And even with these challenges I think I have done okay. My grades did not suffer. I was active in school activities. But here's the reality. Kids like me don't stand a chance. Our dreams are destroyed. The cycle of poverty continues. We don't become the first in the family to get a college degree. We are simply ignored and forgotten. That is why programs like the Homeless Youth/Start Program are here.

In the summer of 2015, after graduating high school I was fortunate enough to go through the process of obtaining a stable living space through **The Connection Inc.** On top of helping me to temporarily pay for an apartment of my own, they give me case management services that help me work towards my goals so that I can be a successful, independent adult. I attend the Waterbury University of Connecticut and love every minute of my life. Being a student is my full-time job, working at Panera Bread is my part time job, being an apartment renter is priority. But because programs such as **The Connection Inc.** homeless youth like me have a chance to change the cycle and make a difference, give back, and educate others.

Thank you again,